

Cocaine and the Coca Leaf
A War Against Drugs Clashes With Tradition in Bolivia
By Hugo Javier Aparicio

I am making my way through the small, isolated Bolivian town of Ambana, on my way to the rura health clinic where I am working. Ambana is poor and lifeless, and ever since we arrived with the Journeys of Reconciliation group the town has exuded a feeling of desertion. It is still early in the afternoon, but few shops are open and the only people I see are a couple of lingering children. The plaza is disturbingly silent.

As I reach the clinic I run into Hilda, one of the nurses, and explain to her that my stomach is upset. She leads me to the kitchen, where she starts to prepare me a tea that will ease my indigestion. Hilda serves me “mate de coca,” a tea made out of the coca leaf, the plant from which cocaine is produced. The coca plant is grown, harvested and processed into its final narcotic form here in Bolivia and in other South American countries. Cocaine is then exported, mainly to the United States, bringing millions of dollars to Bolivia’s informal economy.

But my experience with the coca leaf never had anything to do with cocaine. What I found in Ambana was a small green leaf, about the size and shape of a thumbprint, which is grown in the jungle, sold in the local markets and masticated by both men and women, much like chewing tobacco. Used mainly by the lower class laborers, coca leaves are placed between the cheek and the gums and then chewed and sucked on. Five or six leaves at one time will produce a mild, numbing sensation. Hilda has explained to me that workers use the numbing effects of chewing coca to quell hunger pangs and to allow them to work longer and harder with less nourishment and less rest.

The indigenous farmers surrounding the town of Ambana barely produce enough potatoes, corn and grain to be considered subsistence farmers. When money is running low or if the family needs luxuries such as clothes or cooking utensils, the father and most of the children will take a trip to the Yungas. There, in the jungles of Bolivia, they provide the manual labor to harvest the coca leaf for the generous wage of a few dollars an hour. Although this pilgrimage separates the family and leaves the crops and animals back home untended, this source of income is crucial in an economy that is the second poorest in Latin America, only just ahead of Haiti.

Coca has also integrated itself into the greater society in the form of coca tea, a beverage that is consumed by Bolivians of all classes and ages. The effects of the tea and the coca leaf in general are supposed to be useful in preventing altitude sickness, a common malady in a country that has the highest capital in the world, La Paz, at 12,000 feet above sea level. To counter the effects of oxygen deprivation, we were offered coca tea soon after we disembarked at the El Alto airport (El Alto literally means “The Height.”). Foreign dignitaries are offered the same courtesy when visiting La Paz, although oftentimes completely unaware of the tea’s main ingredient.

There has been intense pressure from the U.S. to eradicate coca production, yet the Bolivian government recognizes the coca leaf as an important part of the indigenous culture and religion. The leaf has been used in traditional medicine and in religious rituals since before 3000 B.C.

Having received aid and advisors from the U.S., Bolivian police are authorized and trained to burn coca crops, amid the outrage and organized protests of the indigenous population. Nevertheless, in an agreement between the government and the “campesinos,” 12,000 hectares have been set aside to grow coca for traditional purposes.

Sentiment against U.S. intervention has never been as apparent as it was in the past summer’s presidential elections. Evo Morales, an Aymara Indian and the country’s single leading producer of coca, placed second in the popular vote. Many believe that his strong showing in the elections was a result of the U.S. ambassador’s public denouncement of the candidate. The ambassador threatened to withhold U.S. aid if the Bolivian Congress elected Morales in the run-off election. Morales was popular among the Indians and other disenfranchised voters, claiming he would stop payments of foreign debt, halt American-backed restrictions of coca growing and nationalize many of Bolivia’s industries. Former president, and millionaire Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada ended up winning the election. This turbulent political situation has caused serious problems in the last few months.

In Ambana, where rapid urbanization and waves of migration have drained the town of its population, the people get by with faltering crops and little or no government assistance. Taking a break from work, I am sitting in the plaza with Marco, one of the local farmers. We are the only two souls in the plaza. The sun reflects off his coarse black hair and darkly tanned skin as he takes out his bag of coca leaves to chew. I ask him why the town is so deserted. He takes a long look at the empty plaza with those dark, pensive Indian eyes.

“It is sad,” he tells me, “God has forgotten this town.”